

Civilized cities or social credit? Overlap and tension between emergent governance infrastructures in China

Global Media and China
2023, Vol. 8(3) 305–326
© The Author(s) 2023
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20594364231163444
journals.sagepub.com/home/gch



Alexander Trauth-Goik 

University of Vienna, Austria

Abstract

Foreign imaginaries of surveillance and informatization in China are commonly connected to notions of omnipresence, advanced technology, and coherent governance. In reality, however, the Chinese government's efforts at the building of a digital society are permeated by confusion over the meaning of central edicts, interdepartmental and regional fragmentation, and overlap between different digital governance systems. This article interrogates the connection between two emerging governance infrastructures embedded in the Chinese Party-state's latest informatization drive, the "National Civilized Cities Award" (NCCA) and the "Social Credit System Project" (SCSP) through a mixed methods approach. It combines data from an analysis of a recent NCCA assessment system government work manual, project websites, and findings from thirty qualitative video interviews with residents from twenty different cities in China to demonstrate that overlap between these projects is clear in terms of 1) criteria and indices measuring project development; 2) promoted virtues and individual behaviors; and 3) data sharing between systems. Local governments charged with the design and implementation of these initiatives frequently conflate their targets and objectives, prompting occasional reprimand from higher-level authorities. Public confusion about the meaning and purpose of both the NCCA and SCSP has meanwhile accompanied haphazard system development, demonstrating that the path towards a "digital society" in China is fraught and far from uncontested.

Keywords

infrastructure studies, social credit system, governance, experimental policymaking, informatization

Corresponding author:

Alexander Trauth-Goik, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna, Hofburg, Wien 1010, Austria.

Email: alexander.trauth-goik@univie.ac.at



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Introduction

Infrastructures increasingly shape the preconditions under which individuals experience themselves and others around them by enabling or constraining aspects of social life (Hill, 1988; Edwards, 2003). Following Edwards (2003: 185–187) networks of sociotechnical systems can be considered infrastructures when they become stable, synchronized, widely accessible, and accepted as part of “a naturalized background [...] systems without which contemporary societies cannot function.” Infrastructures emerge out of an evolutionary process. First, experimentation on the viability of an original concept leads to the production of variations by competing actors. Some from among these prototypes gather greater financial, political, or cognitive investment, or achieve a critical mass of users which leads to the establishment of standards that cohere with a relatively stable system concept (Edwards, 2003: 198–199). Competing variations are forced to convert to the dominant standards and reconfigure their operation, leading to greater uniformity in system design. Eventually this leads to a uniform monopoly and an integrated infrastructure (Edwards, 2003). However, unlike transport or communication infrastructures, “governance infrastructures”—“the collection of technologies and systems, people, policies, practices, and relationships that interact to support governing activities” (Johnston, 2010: 122)—evolve under different pressures. Governance infrastructures are at higher risk of overlap and tension because both the means *and* ends of governance are constantly shifting. This is particularly true today as a mix of public, private, and quasi-private entities are increasingly involved in the establishment of not only physical infrastructures of pipes and cables, but also informational infrastructures predicated on the management, use, access, and distribution of data to support decision making (Fourcade & Healy, 2013; Barns, et al., 2017). For example, through monitoring, recording, and abstracting information about individual activities and interactions on the platform, commercial social media companies produce metadata about users (Andrejevic, 2007; 2010). Initially used to improve the quality and configuration of the platform, such metadata later became the basis of the attention economy where it was converted to a raw material and traded for the accumulation of advertising revenue (Zuboff, 2019). Political campaigners within liberal democracies have since come to rely on purchasing metadata about citizens to encourage their political action or inaction through the use of targeted political messaging (Bennett, 2015; Workman & Hutcheon, 2019). Meanwhile, regulatory efforts have focused on addressing the privacy implications and asymmetries of interest that underpin this type of governance infrastructure, wherein metadata is leveraged to nudge, herd, and condition human behavior at scale (Ada Lovelace, 2022).

Tensions underpinning the evolution of governance infrastructures in China are also readily visible, where lower levels of government are charged with the execution of often ambiguous central-level blueprints for informatization, and practical experience is accumulated through pilot efforts alongside numerous course corrections (Heilmann, 2008; Perry & Heilmann, 2011). Central-level edicts in China are enacted within the administrative framework of *tiao-kuai*; *tiao* being vertical functional organizations, such as ministries, and *kuai* outlining geographical denominators (Lieberthal 1992). These entities often compete for territory and resources which encourages the siloing of information and resistance to interagency collaboration and data sharing (Chen et al., 2018). In January 2022 China’s Central Commission for Cybersecurity released the *14th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization* which encouraged all arms and levels of government to further develop and leverage digital technologies in support of governance activities. This includes but is not limited to, smart cities, artificial intelligences, online public services, blockchain technology, credit evaluation and scoring systems, and quantum information technology (Digi China, 2022). Enhanced

cooperation and data sharing among a variety of administrative units are key expectations underpinning the Party-state's latest informatization drive (Trauth-Goik & Bernot, 2021). Top-down ideologies and discourses serve to define the purpose, goals, and characteristics of emergent governance infrastructures in China, but like elsewhere in the world, lower-level authorities and individual users also appropriate component technologies to their own ends, often for purposes that go beyond the scope of the original design blueprint (Edwards, 2003; Mann et al., 2003; Andrejevic 2005). This paper examines the implementation of two market and urban management projects in China that exemplify the tensions and overlaps between governance infrastructures: the "Social Credit System Project" (SCSP)¹ and the "National Civilized Cities Award" (NCCA).

Research in this area is emerging but remains vague regarding how different governance infrastructures in China relate to one another in terms of ideology, administrative prioritization, evaluation, and data sharing. This is consequential because such projects are frequently conflated without adequate explanation or portrayed as wholly novel with limited attention being paid to the broader governance context within which they evolve. In other words, much current research focuses on how projects like the SCSP and the NCCA operate and function as unitary infrastructures. Rather than on how these projects overlap, complement, or contradict one another in line with the prerogatives of state agencies, Party departments, and local governments, all of which are preoccupied with different aspects of governance in China.

Subsequently, scholars have only lightly touched on the overlap between the NCCA and the SCSP. Flock (2020) argued that the SCSP adds a new technological layer to the control of social interactions in public spaces which the NCCA has long made its business yet remained vague on the precise infrastructural linkages. Journalists have also conflated the two programs without adequate explanation (see, for example, Weedon & Feng, 2019). These preliminary findings indicate a relationship between these two governance programs. To date, however, we know very little about the actual connections which are shared between the NCCA and the SCSP. This paper seeks to contribute towards fulfilling this gap in knowledge by answering the following research questions:

RQ1. What informational, ideological, or bureaucratic linkages does the Social Credit System Project share with the National Civilized Cities Award?

RQ2. Are these linkages repeating, complementing, or contradicting the aims and content of these respective projects?

The current study is structured as follows. The first section summarizes how Chinese policymaking and propaganda relies on the use of keywords to guide and connect disparate policy programs. The second section engages with SCSP and NCCA streams of literature to historicize the projects subject to scrutiny. The third section outlines the chosen methodological approach adopted to answer the research questions and introduces the three sources of data collection: a NCCA government work manual, SCSP and NCCA websites, and qualitative video interviews. The fourth section lays out the research findings, interweaving insights from each phase of data collection to argue that overlap between the NCCA and SCSP is clear in terms of project development measurements, promoted behaviors, and data sharing. The final section reengages with the broader literature for discussion highlighting study limitations and directions for future research.

Keywords in Chinese policymaking and propaganda

As scholars of propaganda in China have well documented, the Party-state runs various policy programs which overlap and reinforce one another in reference to key terminology and phrases (Bakken, 2000; Brady, 2012). For example, the *suzhi* (素质) or “human quality”² discourse came to prominence during the 1980’s in state documents which blamed China’s lagging modernization on the “low quality” (素质低) of the country’s uneducated rural masses (Anagnost, 2004). Initially, *suzhi* was deployed to justify the one-child policy by convincing parents to invest all their resources into the development of a single child that could better contribute to national wealth and power (Fong, 2007). Inspired by educational practices from the developed world that emphasized the role of schooling in developing abilities and dispositions other than those measured by standardized tests, later in the 1990s “*suzhi* education” became endorsed as a means of improving the political, artistic, moral, and technical capacities of the population (Bakken, 2000). Today *suzhi* is used to legitimize the development of governance infrastructures like the SCSP and NCCA as well as their concomitant technologies.

The NCCA and the SCSP overlap when it comes to the range of behaviors they punish and incentivize in reference to specific state-sanctioned virtues. These emergent governance infrastructures are technical inscriptions of much broader ideological concepts such as those encapsulated in the *suzhi* discourse and “Core Socialist Values” (CSVs) campaign. In the words of the CCP Central Committee Secretariat’s report *Opinions concerning Fostering and Practicing the Socialist Core Value View* released in the final months of 2013, the CSVs campaign aims to “extract the ideological quintessence of Chinese culture, create contemporary expressions that are easy to understand [...] and let excellent traditional culture incessantly be carried forward under the conditions of new times” (China Copyright & Media, 2013). The main component of the campaign is a list of twelve virtues that are publicized across all forms of media in China including television, newspapers, radio, billboards, posters, and social media (Gow, 2017). The first are national goals, which include prosperity (富强), democracy (民主), civilization (文明), and harmony (和谐). The second are facilitating individual goals—patriotism (爱国), professional dedication (敬业), trustworthiness (诚信), and friendship (友善). The third are societal goals—freedom (自由), equality (平等), justice (公正), and the rule of law (法治) (Lippiello, 2018: 375). Scholars have begun analyzing how the different CSVs are actually understood by Chinese citizens and operationalized within and across governance initiatives (e.g., de Seta, 2018; Yang, 2018; Lin & Trevaskes, 2019). More than hollow Party rhetoric, the CSVs provide critical ideological support for emergent governance infrastructures in China and inform the scope of behaviors authorities seek to target through the NCCA and the SCSP.

“Credit,” with its accompanying economic and moral connotations, in Chinese is rendered as three distinct words that emphasize each association to a greater or lesser degree: *Zhengxin* (征信), *xinyong* (信用), and *chengxin* (诚信). *Zhengxin* refers to the records collected about a specific individual or organization’s past financial behaviors and is used to determine the likelihood that such actors will fulfill their contractual obligations. The primary Chinese word used in discussions about the SCSP, however, is *xinyong*, which refers not only to the fulfillment capacity of an actor in relation to their economic or financial contractual obligations, but more broadly their legal and regulatory adherence. Finally, as one of China’s twelve CSVs, *chengxin* meaning “trustworthiness” or “sincerity” is the ideological glue which binds these meanings together under the SCSP. The virtue demands that citizens, businesses, and government actors act with sincerity in word and deed to fulfill their promises.

Another CSV notorious for its use in policymaking and propaganda is wenming (文明), commonly translated as “civilization.” This word made its way into the Chinese discourse during the late 19th century after first being interpreted by the Japanese in their translations of European history and society (Wang, 1982). Like the English word, wenming connotes progress and the ongoing project of modernity, while also reflecting sinocentric notions of culture and history (Friedman, 2004). Like suzhi, wenming has proven to be a “locally interpreted concept” (House et al., 2023). In different discursive contexts wenming can mean being 1) cultured, developed, and well-mannered, 2) modernized, 3) accountable, responsible, and environmentally friendly (House et al., 2023). The cluster of meanings associated with each of these keywords makes them amenable to the Chinese policymaking process which is characterized by top-level design and trial and error by local governments (Ahlers & Stepan, 2016; Yu & Biao, 2019). Underlying each keyword is the association between modernization and the cultivation of individual and group qualities that reflect the Party-state’s vision of an ideal society. As will be shown, however, in practice the interpretive act required to turn these keywords into tangible evaluative criteria can become the source of contradiction between governance infrastructures.

Constructing a culture of trustworthiness: China’s social credit system project

The Chinese State Council released its *Planning Outline for the Construction of the Social Credit System* (hereafter *Planning Outline*) in 2014, asserting that China’s rapid development had led to a social atmosphere in which agreements were honored inconsistently and trust among citizens, between businesses, and in government was critically lacking (China Copyright & Media, 2014). Under guidance from the Chinese State Council, and with the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and People’s Bank of China (PBoC) leading in design, SCSP construction is presently being facilitated by a broad array of different actors responsible for an equally large list of regulatory domains. Between 2014–2020 these included, but were not limited to: government procurement, finance, taxation, pricing, traffic and transportation, e-commerce, education and scientific research, environmental protection and energy saving, social organizations, internet applications and services, and finally, “natural persons” (自然人) (China Copyright & Media, 2014). Focusing on the impacts on individuals, many early media depictions overlooked the SCSP’s first priority, which has been to enhance the state’s regulatory powers over companies and government entities (Krause & Fischer, 2020; Schaefer, 2020).

A problem plaguing the existing scholarship on the SCSP has been a tendency to focus on select case studies, jurisdictions, or participating actors to make sweeping assessments about the project as a whole (Nopparuth & Fabrice, 2019), an issue compounded by the challenge of translation highlighted in the previous section. Policy makers, theorists, and the media in China differentiate between a “Social Credit/Social Trust System” (社会信用体系), a “[Financial] Credit System” (征信体系) and an “Honesty and Integrity System” (诚信体系). As a result, there is presently no single “Social Credit System,” rather, there are hundreds of social credit systems being developed that operate under similar logics (Liu, 2019; Trauth-Goik, 2019). The most consequential and well-known of these in China is the nation-wide “Social Credit Blacklist System” that identifies, shames, and restrains “untrustworthy” businesses and individuals for breaking specific laws and regulations (Trauth-Goik & Liu, 2022). Municipal governments have meanwhile been charged with transforming the virtue of “trustworthiness” into more nuanced evaluative criteria through the creation of their own respective Blacklists/Redlists, as well as scoring and rating systems for individuals (Li & Kostka, 2022). Only recently have scholars attempted to conceptualize and explain how the SCSP actually operates as an “ecosystem” (Creemers, 2018) or “system of systems” (Drinhausen &

Brussee, 2021), that builds from and coheres with a network of existing state programs (Tsai et al., 2021), that is, a governance infrastructure. Despite this, limited scrutiny has been brought to bear on exploring what these other programs are or how they relate to the SCSP in terms of bureaucratic, infrastructural, or ideological linkages.

In the lead up to 2020, municipal governments had been given relatively free reign to experiment with the implementation of varied scoring and rating practices to solve regulatory issues within their jurisdictions. However, Tsai et al. (2021) found that officials in some localities were cautious about promoting social credit among the general populace, specifically social credit measures targeting moral and political behaviors of citizens. Earlier social credit prototypes such as in Suining (Jiangsu) had attracted public protest and media criticism for imposing arbitrary punishments on citizens for minor infractions such as jaywalking (Bach, 2020: 494–495). Such cases seemed to alert other jurisdictions about the potential threat to social stability posed by unrestrained social credit system development (Tsai et al., 2021). Elsewhere, however, local authorities have been all too keen to advance personal social credit scores and punishments.

In 2018, authorities in Shenzhen launched a new surveillance system to crack down on jaywalking as well as other crimes equipped with facial recognition, AI, a big database, and a public website to name and shame offenders. The story's reporters claim authorities had conveyed such transgressions would be recorded in the city's social credit system (Xu & Xiao, 2018). The State Council previously called for widescale public opinion polling as a means of gauging what acts people classify as "trust-breaking" (China Copyright & Media, 2016). However, in August 2019, a municipal council comprising the cities of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei launched an online survey open to all residents that asked citizens to vote on what "civilized" and "uncivilized" behaviors authorities should reward or punish (Weedon & Feng, 2019). A few months earlier in July 2019, the Deputy Director of the NDRC Lian Weiliang had announced that personal credit scores could no longer be used for punishment and only as a reward incentive (Tencent Net, 2019). Credit scoring at the local level was applauded for exploring ways to use credit to reward people but criticized for restricting access to basic services and denying citizens their legal rights due to their low scores.

Despite these reprimands, local governments continued to broaden the scope of social credit punishments well into the year 2020. In September 2020, Suzhou introduced a personal credit scoring system, the "Suzhou Civility Code," which had to be withdrawn 3 days after it was launched due to public backlash and media criticism (The Stand News, 2020). The scoring system was comprised of two sets of indexes during the time it was live: "civility in traffic performance" and "civility in voluntary work performance" meaning, for example, persons would have points deducted for jaywalking or drunk-driving and gain extra points for contributing volunteer work. Later upgrades to the system were planned to include more indexes such as "civility in garbage recycling," "civility in dining behavior," and "civility in online behavior" (The Stand News, 2020). Soon after in December 2020, the State Council (2020) reasserted that the inputs of public credit information and definitions of untrustworthy behavior must adhere to either established laws and regulations, or policies and documents specified by itself or the Party Central Committee. This ruling has brought a close to the most extensive of lower-tier social credit experiments. Today most local level social credit systems based on rating or scoring of individuals are "opt in," and function more like loyalty reward programs with reportedly low rates of participation (Drinhausen & Brussee, 2021; Li & Kostka, 2022).

Considering these developments, one of the original theorists and "founding father" of social credit Lin Junyue posited that local governments had used social credit punishments to deal with a lack of social morality and advance a kind of "social civilization system" (社会文明体系), neither designed nor promoted by the central government (Source Credit, 2020). But exactly why was it that

local governments were so eager to broaden the scope of social credit punishments to deal with this so-called “lack of social morality,” particularly if central SCSP authorities disapproved of such efforts and they engendered the risk of public protest? It could be argued that local governments simply misinterpreted the instructions of the State Council and overreached the scope of acceptable experimentation. While tempting, this explanation belies the overlapping and at times conflicting demands that are placed on local governments by different higher-level authorities. A more nuanced answer is that local governments were trying to leverage SCSP construction to satisfy the criteria of an existing and more consequential program—the NCCA.

Constructing spiritual civilization: The National Civilized City Award

A topic subject to far less scholarly inquiry than the SCSP but one that builds from the same discursive context is the “National Civilized Cities Award” (全国文明城市荣誉) (hereafter NCCA). Following the enactment of market reforms under Deng Xiaoping, a discourse concerned with building a “spiritual civilization” (精神文明) began to emerge, spearheaded by the *Guidelines for the Construction of Socialist Spiritual Civilization* (hereafter *Guidelines*) published by the Party Central Committee in 1986. The *Guidelines* stipulated the primary task of building a spiritual civilization was to, “cultivate socialist citizens with ideals, morals, culture, and discipline, and improve the ideological, moral, and scientific and cultural qualities of the entire Chinese nation” (China Civilization Net, 2016). The vagueness of the spiritual civilization discourse has enabled local officials to subsume a wide range of goals under its rubric. From promoting hygiene and mobilizing residents in clean-up efforts of urban spaces (Flock, 2020) to curtailing minority marriage practices (Friedman, 2004), and enforcing codes of appropriate dresswear (Zhou & Xiao, 2020), civilizing campaigns in China continue to permit intrusive interventions in the community.

Protests on Tian’anmen square and cities elsewhere in China in 1989 ushered in a new phase in the construction of spiritual civilization. Local governments became more cautious about mobilizing people in public spaces. They began to concentrate less on practical activities and more on socializing citizens through cultural events (Flock, 2020: 42), and modifying the urban environment in which people lived (Cartier, 2013; 2016; 2020). In May 1997, the Party Central Committee established the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization (hereafter Central Civilization Commission (CCC)) a Party propaganda department practically equivalent in status to the Central Leading Group on Propaganda and Ideological Work (Shambaugh, 2007: 27). Since 2002, the CCC has been headed by the Politburo Standing Committee member responsible for propaganda, highlighting its power and importance within the Party-state bureaucracy. A primary activity facilitated by the CCC since 2003 is the evaluation of cities in China across multiple political, economic, social, and environmental categories and the subsequent rewarding of the honorary title, “National Civilized City” (Cartier, 2020). In 2004, the CCC announced the first “National Civilized Cities Assessment System” to provide “a scientific basis for the creation, evaluation and supervision of civilized cities” (China Youth Daily, 2004). In formulating the assessment standards, research teams from the CCC reviewed United Nations data on urban planning and construction and consulted other foreign indexes of urban modernization (China Youth Daily, 2004). Thus, the program melds Party ideology with recognized models of urban development under global capitalism to produce uniform, ecologically friendly, “civilized” cities; “promoting all-round social progress and all-round development of people” (China Youth Daily, 2004).

The current NCCA assessment system is comprised of nine evaluation projects that draw inspiration from the CSVs and the general notion of improving *suzhi*. “Building a socialist spiritual

civilization with strong vitality and creativity” is the encapsulating **project**, within which the construction of “eight great environments” (八大环境) takes place: honest and efficient government affairs environment, fair and just legal environment, honest and law-abiding market environment, healthy and progressive human environment, harmonious and convenient living environment, safe and stable social environment, and ecologically sustainable environment (see [Net Ease, 2022](#)). In total, 140 criteria are used to measure the progress of civilized cities across these domains (explored in more detail below).³ Government work manuals are distributed by the CCC to lower-level Civilization Committees as well as city officials that apply to be considered for the NCCA or those that seek to retain their title on a yearly basis. However, slightly different evaluation standards are distributed to jurisdictions dependent upon their administrative level; municipalities, provincial capitals and sub-provincial cities, prefecture-level cities, county-level cities, and urban districts ([China Youth Daily, 2004](#); [Cartier, 2016](#): 66). Yearly assessments are conducted through the means of material audits, onsite investigations, questionnaire surveys, and supplemented by reports, internet surveys, and general observation of city conditions.

Previously recognized cities and districts can lose their title and undergo a review with each new intake of civilized cities. Negative events that garner enough publicity can also cause cities to lose their award prior to the triennial listing. For example, Tangshan, a prefecture-level city presented with the NCCA in 2020, was stripped of its title by the CCC in 2022 after footage of several men beating up female customers in a restaurant went viral on social media ([Zhang, 2022](#)). The timing of corruption cases against senior officials also correlates with loss of the NCCA ([Cartier, 2020](#)). Soon after Mayor Xu Zongheng was removed from office in 2011 amidst a corruption investigation, Shenzhen lost its title as civilized city ([Wang, 2011](#)). Two years later Shenzhen became the first city to implement a law that would make “uncivilized behavior,” such as spitting in public, smoking in a non-smoking place, failing to clean-up pets’ excrement in public, and damaging public property subject to fines ([Shenzhen Daily, 2013](#)). Shenzhen later regained its title in 2015. Officials indirectly benefit from their city acquiring the NCCA. Scholars find selection promotes the growth of the local tourism economy ([Chen & Mao, 2021](#)) significantly more than other awards (e.g., “Excellent Tourism City,” “Famous Historical and Cultural City,” or “Smart City” honors). Local officials who have achieved the title of NCCA are also more likely to be promoted ([Zhang et al., 2021](#)). In other words, substantial incentives motivate local governments to both achieve the NCCA and hold onto it. As Gereme [Barmé \(2013\)](#) reminds us, the NCCA is the latest iteration of a nearly hundred-year obsession with improving the level of civilization and *suzhi* of officials and the general population as a means of modernizing Chinese society. The project’s aims dovetail with those of the SCSP, though as this paper will show, in practice this is not always a harmonious coexistence.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the overlap and tension between the NCCA and SCSP in terms of:

- 1) Criteria and indices measuring project development;
- 2) Promoted virtues and individual behaviors; and
- 3) Data sharing between systems.

To achieve these ends, this paper analyzes one government work manual for the NCCA Assessment System, credit and civilization websites, as well as data from thirty video interviews I conducted with residents from twenty different cities in China between November 2020 and April

2021 as part of my doctoral research investigating citizen interpretations and engagements with the SCSP.

Government work manuals

Government work manuals for the NCCA assessment system are not published by the CCC and are difficult to locate online. “Work Manual A” discussed in this paper is the 2021 *NCCA Assessment System Task Breakdown Table for Fuzhou* (prefecture-level city) and was obtained from an online Chinese document depository (Fuzhou Civilization Committee, 2021). Work Manual A provides insight into how the responsibilities for fulfilling NCCA criteria are divided among government work units in a specific prefecture-level city (Table 1). Work manuals must be completed by officials from the city being evaluated through the provision of material audits and records. The second component of the assessment is conducted by assessors from the CCC and lower-level Civilization Committees through onsite investigations, random inspections, and observation of city conditions including surveys and interviews with residents.

The major change to the 2021 edition of the assessment system is that most reports and evaluations from relevant departments can now be submitted online. Broader reforms instigated by the State Council in 2015 are pushing bureaucratic processes onto online platforms to increase the efficiency of government services (Trauth-Goik & Bernot, 2021). There are also more items in the 2021 edition that result in point subtraction. For example, if a serious cybercrime occurs within the jurisdiction 1 year before the evaluation, the evaluation result of that year will receive a 2-point reduction (Sohu, 2022). Finally, the placement of “ideological and moral construction” as the new first assessment criterion in the 2015 edition previously noted by scholars (Cartier, 2020) has been reversed. This criterion has reverted to the original “honest and efficient government affairs environment” in previous manuals while an encapsulating project, “build a socialist spiritual civilization with strong vitality and creativity” has been added (Net Ease, 2022; Sohu, 2022). According to Bao Zonghao, the change reflects ideas expressed in the 2019 Regulations on the Propaganda Work of the Chinese Communist Party (The Paper, 2021) which emphasized the study of Xi Jinping Thought and building Chinese cultural soft power through grassroots innovation that is in alignment with socialist ideology (Sohu, 2022). Sections from Government Work Manual A presented in this paper have been translated into English. All translations are the author’s own.

Websites

Both the SCSP *Planning Outline* and stipulations in previous NCCA work manuals designated the creation of national and municipal level websites for these projects. This study examined the central websites for both the SCSP, “The Credit China Platform” (信用中国网站; hereafter Credit China) and the NCCA, “China Spiritual Civilization Network” (中国精神文明网站; hereafter “China Civilization Net”). Credit China was created in June 2015 and functions as the front-end web portal of the National Credit Information Sharing Platform (NCISP). The website is run by the National Public Credit Information Center under the guidance of the NDRC and PBoC and receives technical support from Beijing Baidu Network Technology Company. China Civilization Net is the portal website of the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and CCC. It is the self-described hub of national cultural thought propaganda work and provides an “important window into the construction of spiritual civilization” (China Civilization Net, 2020a). The primary functions of the website are to promote cultural theory, policy and education, guide customs, and improve peoples’ *suzhi* (China Civilization Net, 2020a). Two municipal level websites for both projects were also

Table 1. Example of the format of Government Work Manual A (page 10).

Evaluation Project	Indicator Name	Evaluation Contents	Evaluation Criteria	Main Tasks and Submission Requirements	Responsible Work Units
<p>I - I Build a socialist spiritual civilization with strong vitality and creativity</p>	<p>II - I Study and propagation of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Age</p>	<p>III - I Party members and cadres are theoretically armed</p>	<p>I. Take the study of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as the primary political task of the party committee and the government, as the main line of learning for the theoretical study center group of the party committee (party group), and as a compulsory course for education and training in the party school (administrative college), and deeply understand the core essence and practical requirements needed to grasp the Marxist standpoints and methods.</p>	<p>I. Provide relevant official documents that reflect the deployment of the Municipal Party Committee and Municipal Government to carry out the study of Xi Jinping's Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, or the study arrangements of the Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department and the Municipal Party Committee Organization Department's annual theoretical study center group.</p>	<p>I & 2: Municipal Party Committee Office (to lead), Municipal Government Office, Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department, Municipal Party Committee Organization Department</p> <p>3. Municipal Party School</p>
			<p>2. Provide an explanatory report on the city's organization of the Party Committee (Party Group) Theory Learning Center Group's study activities and attendance.</p> <p>3. Provide an explanatory report by the Party school (administrative college) in this city showing how Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era has been facilitated as a compulsory education and training course.</p>		

analyzed: Tianjin Credit (天津信用), and Tianjin Civilization Net (天津文明网). Tianjin was selected as previous studies have shown that Tianjin Credit website has established dedicated Redlists for exemplary moral and political behaviors alongside those that reward regular compliance with existing laws and regulations (Engelmann et al., 2021: 83). Several Tianjin city districts have also been consecutive recipients of the NCCA (Tianjin Civilization Net, n.d.).

Interviews

I complement the analysis of work manuals and websites with data gleaned from video interviews I conducted with thirty residents from twenty different cities in China as part of my doctoral dissertation examining citizen interpretations and engagements with the SCSP. Participants were recruited through a pool of virtual contacts I had established through participation in an online language learning and exchange community during the first 2 years of the doctorate. The interview sample was purposively diversified based on gender (20 females and 10 males), location (15 provinces, 20 cities), and age ranges (19–26 (12) 27–34 (9) 35–42 (5) 43–59 (4)). All participants were urban residents. Video interviews were conducted via Skype, recorded with verbal consent, and transcribed to text for analysis. Interviewees are presented using participant pseudonyms and province in brackets for the first mention of the interviewee, and only pseudonym for all mentions thereafter. The deidentification process retained participants' gender, city, province, and age range (e.g., 19–26) but excluded other information.⁴ These qualitative insights supplement the preceding analyses by highlighting how members of the general population conflate the objectives and components of the NCCA and SCSP.

Findings

The following section combines insights derived through the three methods advanced in the methodology to illustrate the overlap and tension between the NCCA and SCSP in terms of project development measurements, promoted behaviors, and data sharing.

Criteria and indices measuring project development

Government work manuals for the NCCA require city authorities to supply evidence demonstrating progress on social credit system construction within their jurisdiction. By tying the evaluation criteria of the former with the success of the latter, progress on the SCSP becomes a prerequisite for the achievement of the NCCA and the benefits it promises in terms of officials' career advancement and boosts to the local tourism economy. In Work Manual A, "trustworthiness" (诚信) is mentioned in reference to the enhancement of government sincerity and transparency and is measured through surveys with city residents, while "credit" (信用) describes the construction of public facing credit infrastructure and publicity. Relevant city departments including the Municipal Development and Reform Commission, Big Data Commission, and Local Financial Supervision Bureau, among others, are required to provide a report detailing the city's establishment of a credit information system. The same authorities must also supply a report explaining the city's implementation of joint credit rewards and punishments and progress on credit restoration mechanisms (page 33). The evaluation content and criteria listed in Work Manual A overlap with those published to the national Credit China website. Cities on Credit China are rated against numerous indicators purported to signify their progress with social credit system construction, including the number of initiated trustworthiness culture promotional activities, convened conferences and meetings, and a combined

social credit city index with unspecified inputs ([Credit China, 2022](#)). A task designated to the Municipal Civilization Committee in Work Manual A is to “carry out special governance for outstanding trustworthiness problems” identified by residents in a city-wide survey as well as supervise government departments (page 34). Surprisingly, residents’ satisfaction with government work on improving trustworthiness survey must be greater than 90% approval in this survey for the evaluation criteria to be satisfied.⁵

As previously mentioned, there are now also more opportunities for point subtraction in the 2021 edition of the NCCA assessment system. Notable SCSP related penalties stated in Work Manual A include a 2-point deduction for the current year’s assessment if either Fuzhou officials or city governments under its jurisdiction have been blacklisted as discredited persons subject to enforcement (court-defaulters).⁶ The 2-point penalty also applies if there have been notable incidents involving infringement of intellectual property rights or reports of export dens that manufacture and sell counterfeit products (page 75). Since the release of the 2021 assessment system, a raft of governments at the county ([Credit Jiamusi, 2021](#); [Pingjiang County People’s Government Office, 2022](#); [Qian’an Municipal People’s Government, 2022](#)), sub-provincial ([Chengdu Development and Reform Commission, 2021](#)), and prefecture levels ([Hebei Daily, 2020](#); [Lu, 2022](#)) have prioritized the development of their social credit systems within new work plans and media publicity targeting the fulfillment of the NCCA.

Types of punishable and incentivized behaviors

One aspect of the NCCA is the promotion of exemplary members of the public whose actions are alleged to reflect the CSVs. In September 2014, three months after the State Council released its *Planning Outline* for the SCSP, China Civilization Net opened a special column titled “Good People 365” (好人365). The column promotes citizens recommended by members of the public who have committed good deeds and their stories to “share positive feelings” and spread the ethos of the CSVs. The website in partnership with People’s Daily, Xinhua, Guangming Network, and CCTV, has published the story of “one good Chinese person” per day since 27 October 2014 ([China Civilization Net, 2022](#)). Additional stories and personal profiles meanwhile appear under five moral categories including “deriving pleasure from helping others” (助人为乐), “being a good Samaritan” (见义勇为), “being sincere and trustworthy” (诚实守信), “professional dedication” (敬业奉献), and “filial piety” (孝老爱亲) ([China Civilization Net, 2022](#)). One criterion in Work Manual A requires that city governments create their own respective civilization websites and promote individuals who display virtuous behavior from among these five categories ([figure 1](#)).

In interviews, I conducted with residents from twenty Chinese cities inquiring into citizen interpretations and engagements with the SCSP, participants equated the function of these exemplary lists promoted by the CCC with Social Credit Redlists. For example, Mr Gao (Hebei) connected Social Credit Redlists with commendation ceremonies he had seen on TV and NCCA activities in his city of Handan, “When we go to the park or some public places there are often signs displaying local role models who have done something like respecting the elderly or helping others. They appear where everyone can see them to remind people about good behavior.” Mrs Luo (Henan) interpreted a question I asked about local government social credit systems as being about the NCCA, “These activities are also taking place in my city of Jiaozuo, it’s one of these National Civilized Cities [...] Everyone is complying better because of this. I think these are good initiatives, quite good.” As the following analysis illustrates, in some jurisdictions exemplary lists promoted through the NCCA are indeed shared with the local credit platform where they are converted into Redlists.

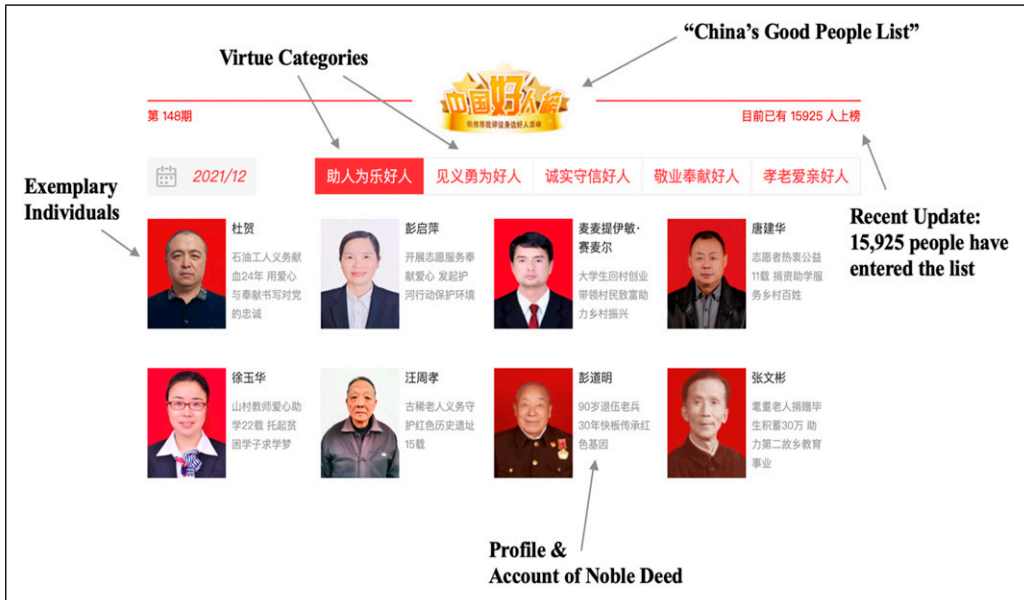


Figure 1. Exemplary candidates listed on Tianjin Civilization Net December 2021.

These virtue categories that draw from the CSVs also appear in rural localities championed as social credit pioneers on both Credit China and China Civilization Net. Within China, the SCSP is commonly portrayed as an alternate means of granting financial credit to masses of Chinese with limited access to state-owned banking (Loubere, 2017; Bach, 2020), and as a way to empower rural residents, small businesses and improve access to welfare (Shahin & Zheng, 2018). In accordance with commands specified in the State Council’s 2014 *Planning Outline*, social credit experiments were endorsed across rural localities. “Banks of virtue” (道德银行) have since been established across numerous counties and include a broader suite of virtues and behaviors other than just trustworthiness into the assessment of personal loan eligibility. Villagers in these counties can earn points for virtuous behaviors which can then be used to obtain financial or other material benefits (Nan Yang Civilization Net, 2022). For example, in 2014, Rushan County (Weihai city) established village level peer review sessions wherein residents score each other’s behaviors according to a set of publicized village norms including “honoring one’s parents,” “good neighbourliness,” and “dedicated work ethic.” Highly scored individuals enter the Civilized Credit User list and gain privileged access to agricultural loans, financial assistance for entrepreneurial undertakings, technical training, and skill development among other benefits (China Civilization Net, 2014). Such experiments appear frequently in state media reports that champion the SCSP as a partial solution to inequality and underdevelopment across China’s rural regions. But rather than being a novel SCSP invention, the virtues incentivized in these examples clearly draw from the discourse associated with the NCCA and longer running spiritual civilization campaigns.

In the attempt to incorporate a broader suite of virtues into social credit system construction, specifically for personal loan assessment and delegation of citizen privileges, a reverse trend seems to have occurred wherein local governments used social credit rewards and punishments to address NCCA criteria. Several NCCA work manual criteria list the regulation of uncivilized behaviors in

public spaces as a key priority for city officials. This includes activities such as, quarreling in public, open spitting, irresponsible pet ownership, damaging greenery, jaywalking, line cutting when queuing, and disobeying of no smoking signs (Page 55–58). As discussed above, these are specific behaviors that authorities across multiple jurisdictions opted to include as part of their social credit systems, among them Suining, Shenzhen, and Suzhou.

Data sharing

Aside from overlapping evaluation criteria and targeted virtues and behaviors, limited data sharing also takes place between the website platforms for both the NCCA and SCSP. Some municipal social credit websites maintain specific Redlists for model exemplars identified by the NCCA within their credit databases. For example, the Tianjin Credit website has established a Redlist titled “Tianjin Good Person” (天津好人) (Credit China Tianjin, 2022). Persons on this list are Redlisted by the Tianjin Civilization Committee for demonstrating one from among five categories of virtuous behavior promoted by the CCC described above. The Credit China website for Qingyuan district (Ji’an city) had similarly published a “Trustworthy Redlist” comprised of individuals from another list supplied by the district’s Civilization Committee (Qingyuan District Government, 2021). Meanwhile the national Credit China website republishes commendation events facilitated by local Civilization Committees that reward exemplary individuals (Credit China, 2019), further blurring the lines between these initiatives.

Discussion

Researchers are increasingly interested in the development of governance infrastructures in China, but what has been set aside in this emerging space has been a systematic assessment of the actual linkages—informational, ideological, and bureaucratic—that are shared between such projects. To begin addressing this gap, this study has adopted a mixed methods methodology to analyze the overlap and tension that exists between the SCSP and NCCA in terms of project development measurements, promoted behaviors, and data sharing. This study contributes to the emerging literature examining the CSVs propaganda campaign (e.g., De Seta, 2018; Yang, 2018; Lippiello, 2018; Lin & Trevaskes, 2019) by illustrating how abstract virtues are operationalized across governance initiatives to inform the delegation of finance and citizen privileges, regulate conduct in urban spaces, and build normative consensus around traditional cultural ideals that are supportive of authoritarianism. These emergent governance infrastructures can be understood as technical inscriptions of specific CSVs, trustworthiness (诚信) and civilization (文明), which are intended to mutually reinforce one another and give direction to government policy. However, both these values mean many things to many people (House, et al., 2023). In practice the interpretive act required to turn these keywords into tangible evaluative criteria can also be the source of contradiction between governance infrastructures.

For the most part, the linkages between the NCCA and SCSP are mutually reinforcing. SCSP criteria are increasingly integrated into NCCA assessment system government work manuals. Not only does this include criteria that can earn cities’ points, such as establishing functioning joint-punishment and reward and credit restoration mechanisms, but also those that detract from the evaluation, such as members of government being blacklisted as court-defaulters. In terms of data sharing, some local credit websites maintain specific Redlists for model exemplars identified by Civilization Committees within their databases. Meanwhile the national Credit China website republishes commendation events that reward exemplary individuals as part of the NCCA.

Propaganda efforts have focused on strengthening the ideological connection between these initiatives by framing the construction of local social credit systems as a necessary component of civilized city status.

While the healthy development of any infrastructure will take advantage of evolutionary dynamics to ascertain the fittest solution to various problems (Johnston, 2010), the porous boundaries that exist between the SCSP and NCCA in China today nonetheless prevent local governments from establishing the kind of neat and coherent systems that central-level planners aspire for them to create. This paper has shone light on why it is that some local governments have been so eager to broaden the scope of social credit punishments to deal with minor infractions, even though this engenders the risk of public protest and central disapproval. On the one hand, the CCC, a Party propaganda department and overseer of the NCCA, expects city governments to regulate and standardize behavior in public spaces through innovative means. Initially this cohered with the broad agenda of SCSP experimentation promoted by the State Council. Recently, however, the scope of this experimentation has narrowed as state agencies responsible for the SCSP have re-asserted that personal credit scores cannot be used for punishment and that credit decisions must directly relate to existing laws and regulations. While the malleability and intrusiveness of local social credit systems was officially curtailed, the imperative to satisfy NCCA criteria remained a key priority for city officials. This helps explain why some city governments continued to broaden the scope of their systems even in the face of new directives from central SCSP authorities. The interview findings illustrate how these contradictions are reflected in hazy public understandings concerning the intended targets and scope of the SCSP. While some believe the project exclusively targets issues of a monetary nature and the enhancement of commercial trust, others believe the primary purpose is to strengthen the regulation of uncivilized behaviors in public spaces like those specified in NCCA work manuals. This situation reflects the difficulties associated with building alignments between infrastructures that administer different domains of social life (Bowker et al., 2009). Specific to China, it underlines the conflicting demands placed on city governments by different higher-level authorities, exposing the drawbacks of “top-level design” and “local discretion” which typifies the experimentation-based policy cycle (Heilmann, 2008; He & Warren, 2011).

The use of the CSVs as ideological flint for the lighting of government infrastructure projects is muddled by the subjective interpretations required to transform these virtues into evaluative criteria. Adopting an infrastructure studies lens, we can see the frictions, misalignments, and unpredictable interactions that frequently materialize once classification systems based on the abstraction and utilization of data are operationalized (Bowker & Star, 2008). When actors operating under unbalanced incentive structures are charged with the fulfillment of competing central mandates, inoperability and paralysis become likely first outcomes for emerging infrastructures in place of innovative excellence. These challenges significantly undercut the advantages of policy experimentation and challenge the development of governance infrastructures in China during the new era of digitalization.

Limitations and future research directions

Although this study shed preliminary light on the current linkages between the NCCA and SCSP, it could not systematically assess how a city’s pursuit of the NCCA affects the construction of local social credit systems. A significant gap in scholarship is that we know little about the bureaucratic channels through which officials’ action NCCA criteria. Tsai et al. (2021) findings in a model social credit demonstration city suggest that officials in some jurisdictions attempt to game the evaluation

process by constructing website platforms that not all departments contribute data towards or create superficial systems that are not actually used. It is likely that similar fraudulent attempts at satisfying NCCA criteria occur, particularly because some of the primary means of assessment are interviews and surveys with city residents which could easily be tempered with. Future studies should prioritize locating and analyzing other NCCA government work manuals for different administrative levels, and systematically mapping the changes that have occurred across each version of the assessment system since 2005. Finally, this study revealed that at a local level, Municipal Civilization Committees are charged with supervising government departments and identifying “trustworthiness” issues of public concern through surveys with city residents. In the English-speaking literature, little is presently known about the role that Party departments like the CCC play within the overall construction and enforcement of the SCSP. This is something researchers should seek to evaluate.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the generous benefactors of this scheme for their support. Email: alexander.trauth-goik@univie.ac.at

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was conducted as part of the ERC funded project “Engineering a Trustworthy Society: The Evolution, Perception and Impact of China’s Social Credit System” (Grant ID: 101001964).

ORCID iD

Alexander Trauth-Goik  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1223-1044>

Notes

1. Following the lead of Xin Dai (2018), this article opts for the title “Social Credit System Project” (hereafter the “SCSP”) to refer to the overarching framework or guiding ethos behind the design and rollout of different social credit systems that the State Council charged national, provincial, and municipal governments with constructing in the *Planning Outline for the Construction of the Social Credit System* released in 2014.
2. *Suzhi* is often seen translated as “human quality,” however, this term fails to convey the full spectrum of meaning attached to the word. At the turn of the century at least 32 different English terms had been posited as accurate translations (Tong, 1999). As with many Chinese words, an accurate translation for *suzhi* may prove forever elusive given that the term simultaneously refers to two concepts. On one level *suzhi* is evoked to point to specific qualities of a person (physicality, education, politeness), on another it encompasses an overarching judgment of personhood—“capital Q ‘Quality’” (Kipnis, 2006: 303). Inscribed in this second plane of meaning is a sense of hierarchy and morality. While the plural form of *suzhi* can be translated and appreciated in a liberal discourse (everyone has different qualities), its singular cannot (people of high Quality are better than those of low Quality).

3. Since 2005, the CCC has published five rounds of the NCCA every 3 years. Correspondingly, new editions of the assessment system have been issued in 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021, or roughly every three to 4 years, reflecting “an evolving policy regime based on Party thought work” (Cartier, 2020: 209). The CCC entrusts Civilization Committees of provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities to conduct annual evaluations of cities nominated for the NCCA during the first 2 years of the 3-year cycle. In the third year, the CCC reviews the nominated cities they recommend and determines the new national civilized cities based on the weighted average score of the 3-year evaluation (Net Ease, 2022). The sixth and latest list released in 2020 announced 133 new civilized cities/districts in addition to 151 cities/districts that retained the honor from the previous listing in 2017 (China Civilization Net, 2020b).
4. This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Wollongong (2020/090)
5. A template of this survey is provided at the end of Work Manual A (pages 59–64)
6. The largest Social Credit Blacklist, the “Discredited Subject Under Enforcement List” (失信被执行人名单), was released by the Supreme People’s Court in 2003 and strengthened in 2013 to deal with the issue of weak law enforcement in China. It targets local governments, companies, organizations, and individuals that default on their court-ordered judgments, specifically those who are alleged to possess the finances to repay their debts but refuse to do so or continue to operate a business after the license has been revoked. See Trauth-Goik and Liu (2022)

References

- Ada Lovelace Institute. (2022). *Rethinking data and rebalancing digital power*. Ada Lovelace Institute. <https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/report/rethinking-data/>
- Ahlers, A., & Stepan, M. (2016). Top-level design and local-level paralysis: Local politics in times of political centralisation. *Merics Papers on China*, 1(June), 34–39.
- Anagnost, A. (2004). The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi). *Public Culture*, 16(2), 189–208. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-2-189>
- Andrejevic, M. (2002). The work of watching one another: lateral surveillance, risk, and governance. *Surveillance & Society*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v2i4.3359>
- Andrejevic, M. (2007). *iSpy: Surveillance and power in the interactive era*. University Press of Kansas.
- Andrejevic, M. B. (2010). Surveillance and alienation in the online economy. *Surveillance & Society*, 8(3), 278–287. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v8i3.4164>
- Bach, J. (2020). The red and the black: China’s social credit experiment as a total test environment. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 71(3), 489–502. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12748>
- Bakken, B. (2000). *The exemplary society: Human improvement, social control, and the dangers of modernity in China*. Oxford University Press.
- Barmé, G. (2013). Introduction: Engineering Chinese Civilisation. In G. Barmé & J. Goldkorn (Eds.), *The China Story. Australian Centre on China in the World and The Australian National University*. <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2013/introduction-engineering-chinese-civilisation/>
- Barns, S., Cosgrave, E., Acuto, M., & McNeill, D. (2017). Digital infrastructures and urban governance. *Urban Policy and Research*, 35(1), 20–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2016.1235032>
- Bennett, C. J. (2015). Trends in voter surveillance in western societies: privacy intrusions and democratic implications. *Surveillance & Society*, 13(3/4), 370–384. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v13i3/4.5373>
- Bowker, G. C., Baker, K., Millerand, F., & Ribes, D. (2009). Toward information infrastructure studies: ways of knowing in a networked environment. In J. Hunsinger, L. Klastrup, & M. Allen (Eds.), *International handbook of internet research* (pp. 97–117). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9789-8_5.

- Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (2008). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences* (1. paperback ed., 8. print). MIT Press.
- Brady, A.-M. (2012). State Confucianism, Chineseness, and tradition in CCP propaganda. In A.-M. Brady (Ed.), *China's thought management*. Routledge.
- Cartier, C. (2013). Chapter 5: Building Civilised Cities. In G. Barmé & J. Goldkorn (Eds.), *The China Story. Australian Centre on China in the World and The Australian National University*. <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2013/chapter-5-building-civilised-cities/>.
- Cartier, C. (2016). Governmentality and the urban economy: Consumption, excess, and the 'civilized city' in China. In D. Bray & E. Jeffreys (Eds.), *New mentalities of government in China*. Routledge. Taylor & Francis.
- Cartier, C. (2020). China's "New" Socialist City: From Red Aesthetics to Standard Urban Governance. In L. B. W. Drummond & D. Young (Eds.), *Socialist and Post-Socialist Urbanisms: Critical Reflections from a Global Perspective*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442632844>.
- Chengdu Development and Reform Commission. (2021, December 20). Chengdu, Sichuan vigorously promotes the construction of a social credit system to help create a civilized city 四川成都大力推进社会信用体系建设 助力文明城市创建. www.wenming.cn中国文明网. http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf_294/cxjszdh/202112/t20211220_6271367.shtml
- Chen, L., Lai, T., & Zhou, L. (2020, March 23). Collective Territoriality as a Major Barrier to Interagency Government Data Sharing in China: A Review of Existing Literature. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/106599>
- Chen, Y.-J., Lin, C.-F., & Liu, H.-W. (2018). Rule of Trust: The Power and Perils of China's Social Credit Megaproject. *Columbia Journal of Asian Law*, 32(1), 1–36.
- Chen, Q., & Mao, Y. (2021). Do city honors increase tourism economic growth? a quasi-natural experimental research study based on "civilized city" selection in China. *Sustainability*, 13(22), 12545. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212545>
- China Civilization Net. (2014, March 21). Promoting the institutionalisation of honesty and integrity construction throughout Weihai welcoming the sincere and letting the untrustworthy suffer 威海各地推进诚信建设制度化 让诚信吃香失信吃亏. www.wenming.cn. http://www.wenming.cn/syjswmq/zxjyzl/jj/201403/t20140321_1820557.shtml
- China Civilization Net. (2016, February 15). Resolution of the central Committee of the communist Party of China on the Guidelines for the Construction of socialist spiritual civilization 中共中央关于社会主义精神文明建设指导方针的决议 (1986年). www.wenming.cn, http://www.wenming.cn/ziliao/wenjian/jigou/zhonggongzhongyang/201602/t20160215_3144911.shtml
- China Civilization Net. (2020a). About us—China civilisation Net 关于我们中国文明网. www.wenming.cn. <http://www.wenming.cn/c/gywm/>
- China Civilization Net. (2020b, November 10). Central Civilization Office releases the list of selected cities for the sixth national civilized city and the list of the first five national civilized cities intake that were confirmed to retain the honorary title after review 中央文明办公布第六届全国文明城市入选城市名单和复查确认保留荣誉称号的前五届全国文明城市名单. www.wenming.cn, http://www.wenming.cn/specials/2020bz/bzjd_51677/202011/t20201109_5843001.shtml
- China Civilization Net. (2022). Good people 365—China civilisation Net 好人365—中国文明网. www.wenming.cn. http://www.wenming.cn/sbhr_pd/hr365/
- China Copyright and Media. (2013, December 22). *Opinions concerning fostering and practicing the socialist Core value View*. China Copyright and Media. <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/12/23/opinions-concerning-fostering-and-practicing-the-socialist-core-value-view/>
- China Copyright and Media (2014). June 14). *Planning outline for the construction of a social credit system (2014-2020)*. China Copyright and Media. <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2014/06/14/planning-outline-for-the-construction-of-a-social-credit-system-2014-2020/>

- China Copyright and Media. (2016, May 30). *State council guiding opinions concerning establishing and perfecting incentives for promise-keeping and joint punishment systems for trust-breaking, and accelerating the construction of social sincerity*. China Copyright and Media. <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2016/05/30/state-council-guiding-opinions-concerning-establishing-and-perfecting-incentives-for-promise-keeping-and-joint-punishment-systems-for-trust-breaking-and-accelerating-the-construction-of-social-sincer/>
- China Youth Daily. (2004, September 24). Central civilization Commission announces the “national civilized city assessment system (trial)” 中央文明委颁发《全国文明城市测评体系(试行)》. http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2004-09/24/content_956728.htm
- Credit China. (2019). *The honesty of the wind bathing neighborhood Nantong Port Gate commends 20 “integrity residents” 诚信之风沐浴邻里 南通港闸表彰20位“诚信居民*. Credit China Platform. https://www.creditchina.gov.cn/chengxinwenhua/chengxingushi/201903/t20190325_150692.html
- Credit China. (2022). City credit 城市信用. *Credit China platform*. <https://www.creditchina.gov.cn/csxynw/?navPage=12>
- Credit China Tianjin. (2022). Redlist disclosure: “Tianjin good people” public credit information 红名单公示: “天津好人” 公共信用信息. <https://credit.fzgg.tj.gov.cn/xygs/hhmdlList.do?domainid=029>
- Credit Jiamusi. (2021, August 3). Strengthen the construction of the social credit system and make integrity the background color of a civilized city 加强社会信用体系建设 让诚信成为文明城市底色. <http://Credit.Jms.Gov.Cn>. <http://credit.jms.gov.cn/312/36293.html>
- Creemers, R. (2018). China’s Social Credit System: An Evolving Practice of Control. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3175792>
- Dai, X. (2018). Toward a Reputation State: The Social Credit System Project of China. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3193577>
- de Seta, G. (2018). Wenming Bu Wenming: The Socialization of Incivility in Postdigital China. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 2010–2030.
- Digi China. (2022). *Translation: 14th five-year plan for national informatization. Dec. 2021*. Digi China <https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/translation-14th-five-year-plan-for-national-informatization-dec-2021/>
- Drinhausen, K., & Brussee, V. (2021). China’s social credit System in 2021: From fragmentation towards integration (*China monitor*). MERICS. <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-social-credit-system-2021-fragmentation-towards-integration>
- Edwards, P. N. (2003). Infrastructure and modernity: force, time, and social organization in the history of. In T. Misa, P. Brey, & A. Feenberg (Eds.), *Modernity and Technology* (pp. 185–225). MIT Press.
- Engelmann, S., Chen, M., Dang, L., & Grossklags, J. (2021). Blacklists and Redlists in the Chinese Social Credit System: Diversity, Flexibility, and Comprehensiveness. In Proceedings of the 2021 AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society (pp. 78–88). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3461702.3462535>
- Flock, R. (2020). Civilising urban public space: An analysis of ideology and governance strategies. *Civilisations*, 69, 33–60. <https://doi.org/10.4000/civilisations.5728>
- Fong, V. L. (2007). Morality, cosmopolitanism, or academic attainment? discourses on ‘quality?’ and urban chinese-only-children’s claims to ideal personhood. *City & Society*, 19(1), 86–113. <https://doi.org/10.1525/city.2007.19.1.86>
- Fourcade, M., & Healy, K. (2013). Classification situations: Life-chances in the neoliberal era. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 38(8), 559–572. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aos.2013.11.002>
- Friedman, S. L. (2004). Embodying Civility: Civilizing Processes and Symbolic Citizenship in Southeastern China. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 63(3), 687–718. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911804001688>
- Fuzhou Civilization Committee. (2021). Notice on Distributing the 2021 Editions of the ‘Fuzhou task Breakdown Table of the national civilized city evaluation system’ and ‘Fuzhou city task Breakdown Table

- of the national Ideological and moral construction work evaluation System for minors 关于印发2021年版《全国文明城市测评体系福州市任务分解表》和《全国未成年人思想道德建设工作测评体系福州市任务分解表》的通知。” Minjiang Teachers College. <http://www.fzmjtc.cn/mbgs/info/1093/1691.htm>
- Gow, M. (2017). The Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Dream: Towards a Chinese integral state. *Critical Asian Studies*, 49(1), 92–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2016.1263803>
- Hebei Daily. (2020, August 10). Baoding implements “Red and Blacklist” management and joint credit rewards and punishments 保定实行“红黑名单”管理和信用联合奖惩. Credit China Qingdao. http://www.qingdao.gov.cn/credit/csxxy_99/dxa1_100/202204/t20220402_5192376.shtml
- Heilmann, S. (2008). From Local Experiments to National Policy: The Origins of China’s Distinctive Policy Process. *The China Journal*, 59, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1086/tcj.59.20066378>
- He, B., & Warren, M. E. (2011). Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9(2), 269–289. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711000892>
- Hill, S. (1988). *The tragedy of technology: Human liberation versus domination in the late twentieth century*. Pluto Press.
- House, J., Kádár, D. Z., Liu, F., & Han, D. (2023). The problem of translating Chinese policy-related expressions: A case study of wenming (‘civilised’). *Text & Talk*, 0(0), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2021-0142>
- Johnston, E. (2010). Governance Infrastructures in 2020. *Public Administration Review*, 70, S122–S128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02254.x>
- Kipnis, A. (2006). Suzhi: A Keyword Approach. *The China Quarterly*, 186, 295–313. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000166>
- Krause, T., & Fischer, D. (2020). An Economic Approach to China’s Social Credit System. In O. Everling (Ed.), *Social Credit Rating* (pp. 437–453). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-29653-7_22
- Lieberthal, K. (1992). Introduction: The “fragmented authoritarianism” model and Its limitations. In K. Lieberthal & D. M. Lampton (Eds.), *Bureaucracy, politics, and decision making in post-Mao China*. University of California Press.
- Li, H., & Kostka, G. (2022). Accepting but not engaging with it: Digital participation in local government-run social credit systems in China. *Policy & Internet*. [poi3.316 https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.316](https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.316)
- Lin, D., & Trevaskes, S. (2019). Creating a Virtuous Leviathan: The Party, Law, and Socialist Core Values. *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 6(01), 41–66. <https://doi.org/10.1017/als.2018.41>
- Lippiello, T. (2018). The paradigms of religious and philosophical plurality: The return of “spirituality” in China today. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 44(4), 371–381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718760358>
- Liu, C. (2019). Multiple Social Credit Systems in China. *Economic Sociology: The European Electronic Newsletter*, 21(1), 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/v9fns>
- Loubere, N. (2017). Cyber loan sharks, social credit, and new frontiers of digital control. In J. Golley, L. Jaivin, & L. Tomba (Eds.), *Control*. ANU Press.
- Lu, S. (2022, February 8). Improve the social credit system and transmit positive energy for the building of our civilized city 完善社会信用体系 为构建文明城市传递正能量. Benxi Net. <http://www.ibenxi.com/portal.php?mod=view&aid=80523>
- Mann, S., Nolan, J., & Wellman, B. (2002). Sousveillance: Inventing and using wearable computing devices for data collection in surveillance environments. *Surveillance & Society*, 1(3), 331–355. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v1i3.3344>
- Nan Yang Civilisation Net. (2022, June 10). Xinye county: Promoting the Construction of “Bank of virtue” and Building a new Village of “Civilization and Harmony”新野县: 推进“道德银行”建设 构建“文明和谐”新村南阳文明网. Nan Yang civilisation Net. http://hnny.wenming.cn/ddjs/202206/t20220610_7658131.html
- Net Ease. (2022, May 7). *It takes one picture to understand | National Civilized City Evaluation System Diagram* 图读懂 | 全国文明城市测评体系图解. Net Ease. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H6PO0OFT0552QUFR.html>

- Nopparuth, R., & Fabrice, W. M. (2019). China's Social Credit System as a Stimulant of Donation Behavior: Assessment of Students' Opinions. *International Journal of Organizational Innovation*, 11(4), 165–178.
- Perry, E. J., & Heilmann, S. (2011). Embracing uncertainty: guerrilla policy style and adaptive governance in China. In *mao's invisible hand: the political foundations of adaptive governance in China*. <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/30821257>
- Pingjiang County People's Government Office. (2022, March 24). Notice of the Office of the People's Government of Pingjiang County on Printing and Distributing the "implementation Plan for the Construction of Pingjiang county's social credit System to Promote the Creation of a national civilized city" 平江县人民政府办公室 关于印发《平江县社会信用体系建设助推全国文明城市创建工作实施方案》的通知. Pingjiang Government Network. https://www.pingjiang.gov.cn/35048/35064/54417/content_1940254.html
- Qian'an Municipal People's Government. (2022, August 16). Qian'an City Credit Office increases integrity propaganda to help create a civilized city 迁安市信用办加大诚信宣传 助力文明城市创建. [Www.Qianan.Gov.Cn. http://www.qianan.gov.cn/content/90241.html](http://www.qianan.gov.cn/content/90241.html)
- Qingyuan District Government. (2021, September 8). 2021 Qingyuan district integrity Red and blacklist 2021 年青原区诚信红黑榜. Qingyuan District Government. <http://www.qyq.gov.cn/xgk-show-10196233.html>
- Schaefer, K. (2020). China's Corporate Social Credit System: Context, Competition, Technology and Geopolitics (p. 95) [Research report]. Trivium China. <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-corporate-social-credit-system-context-competition-technology-and-geopolitics>
- Shahin, S., & Zheng, P. (2018). Big Data and the Illusion of Choice: Comparing the Evolution of India's Aadhaar and China's Social Credit System as Technosocial Discourses. *Social Science Computer Review*, 38(1), 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318789343>
- Shambaugh, D. (2007). China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy. *The China Journal*, 57, 25–58. <https://doi.org/10.1086/tcj.57.20066240>
- Shenzhen Daily. (2013, January 24). Civility law to take effect March 1. Shenzhen Daily. http://www.szdaily.com/content/2013-01/24/content_7640843.htm.
- Sohu. 2022. In *Conversation with Bao Zonghao, Chief Expert of 'National Civilized City Evaluation System': To Create a Civilized Model City, Chengdu Must Seize the Characteristics of 'Happy City' and Reshape the Urban Spirit* 对话《全国文明城市测评体系》首席专家鲍宗豪: 创建文明典范城市, 成都要抓住“幸福城市”特质, 重塑城市精神. Sohu.Com. https://www.sohu.com/a/574152217_116237
- Source Credit. (2020, September 14). Lin Junyue: Identifying the Nature of the social credit System and its practical significance 林钧跃: 辨识社会信用体系的性质及其现实意义. Credit Jiangsu. http://credit.jiangsu.gov.cn/art/2020/9/14/art_78395_9504521.html
- Tencent Net. (2019, July 18). *Development and reform commission: Personal credit points can be combined with incentives for trustworthiness but cannot be used for punishment* 发改委: 个人信用分可以结合守信激励 但不能用于惩戒. Tencent Net. <https://new.qq.com/omn/20190718/20190718A0W6MO00.html>
- The Paper. (2021). *Regulations on the propaganda work of the communist party of China*《中国共产党宣传工作条例》. The Paper. https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_15323992
- The Stand News. (2020, September 13). *A Chinese city withdraws 'civility code' following online criticism*. Global Voices. <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/13/a-chinese-city-withdraws-civility-code-following-online-criticism/>
- Tianjin Civilisation Net. (n.d.). *Creating civilised city districts* 创建文明城区. Tianjin Civilisation Net. Retrieved September 5, 2022, from <http://www.tjwenming.cn/cjwmsq/mulu.shtml>
- Tong, J. (1999). An analysis of the English translations of suzhi jiaovu 素质教育英意辨析. *Journal of the Changliang Vocational University*, 16(4), 35–38.
- Trauth-Goik, A. (2019). Constructing a Culture of Honesty and Integrity": The Evolution of China's Han-centric Surveillance System. *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, 38(4), 75–81. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MTS.2019.2948444>

- Trauth-Goik, A., & Bernotaite, A. (2021). Decentralising Data Collection and Centralising Information in the People's Republic of China: Decentralise, Manage, and Service Reforms. *Surveillance & Society*, 19(4), 518–536. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v19i4.14371>
- Trauth-Goik, A., & Liu, C. (2022). Black or Fifty Shades of Grey? The Power and Limits of the Social Credit Blacklist System in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 0(0), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2128638>
- Tsai, W.-H., Wang, H.-H., & Lin, R. (2021). hobbling big brother: top-level design and local discretion in China's social credit system. *The China Journal*, 000–000. <https://doi.org/10.1086/714492>
- Wang, G. (1982, May 21). *The Chinese urge to civilize: Reflections on change*. The Australian Academy of the Humanities.
- Wang, X. (2011, May 2). Just the tip of an iceberg for official graft. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/article/966593/just-tip-iceberg-official-graft>.
- Weedon, A., & Feng, K. (2019, August 20). China's "participatory authoritarianism" plans to boot out bad personal behaviour in a few clicks—ABC News (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-20/beijing-given-vote-to-decide-on-uncivilised-behaviour/11427054>
- Workman, M., & Hutcheon, S. (2019, August 11). Topham guerin: The team that helped scott Morrison win is now working for Boris Johnson and Brexit [newspaper]. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-08/topham-guerins-boomer-meme-industrial-complex/11682116?sf223218015=1&fbclid=IwAR1YhoDndoQQHJ6KExCstOZO6Ix2U90owGg2hphGiiRWI32PKz4L9Lu6IPo>
- Xu, V. X., & Xiao, B. (2018, March 20). Chinese authorities use facial recognition, public shaming to crack down on crime. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-20/china-deploys-ai-cameras-to-tackle-jaywalkers-in-shenzhen/9567430>
- Yang, G. (2018). Demobilizing the Emotions of Online Activism in China: A Civilizing Process. *International Journal of Communication*, 12(19328036), 1945–1965.
- Yu, J., & Biao, H. (2019). Mapping the progress of local government innovation in contemporary China. In J. Yu & S. Guo (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Local Governance in Contemporary China*. Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2799-5>.
- Zhang, Y. (2022, June 22). Tangshan removed from civilized cities list. China Daily. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/22/WS62b2b61ea310fd2b29e67e5b.html>
- Zhang, C., Liu, Q., Ge, G., Hao, Y., & Hao, H. (2021). The impact of government intervention on corporate environmental performance: Evidence from China's national civilized city award. *Finance Research Letters*, 39, 101624. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2020.101624>
- Zhou, C., & Xiao, B. (2020, January 22). Chinese authorities name and shame people wearing pyjamas in public. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-22/chinese-city-shames-people-for-wearing-pyjamas-in-public/11888722>
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for the future at the new frontier of power*. Profile Books.

Author biography

Alexander Trauth-Goik is a political science and sociology post-doctoral researcher at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna. His current research examines the ways in which people interpret and engage with new regimes of classification and evaluation enabled by the operationalization of big data in governance, with a focus on the overlap and tension between different governance programs in China.